WHITE FLOWER;

OR,

THE COMANCHE'S DREAM.

A Romance of Savage Chivalry and Texan Valor in the Days of Slavery.

By the Late COL. E. Z. C. JUDSON

(NED BUNTLINE.)

CHAPTER I.

The great camp of the Comanches was pitched in a wild and picturesque gorge of the Sierras Charrate, where the waters of the Rio Pecos bounded, all glittering, from their rocky source. The ornamented lodges of tanned buffalo skin rose thick—like the houses of a large village—in a small basin carpeted with grass and flowers, which had been hollowed out by nature's hand between the lofty mountains, and the smoke of the watch fires rose like misty pillars in the still air. The moon was at its full, and though the hour of sunrise was not yet come, all around seemed clear as daylight—so transparent was the atmosphere, so cloudless the sky.

To and fro, in front of the narrow entrance to the gorge, where their eyes could scan the vast extent of prairie to the east, rode the sentinels of the camp, and within, picketed so as to be ready for instant use, in case of alarm, were the wild steeds of the Indian braves.

It would have been a study for a painter, that camp! High on either hand rose the great dark cliffs, with vines and shrubs clinging here and there to their precipitous sides; down them rushed silvery cascades—sometimes leaping off into a cloud of spray, again trickling in light gem-drops down into the mossy beds below. Then that picturesque amphitheater at the foot of the rocks, now tented over for a foreground, would complete the picture.

It was not yet the hour of dawn when a wild, shrill yell was heard from the large central lodge of the camp. It was the war whoop, and scarce had its fearful echoes rung from cliff to cliff of the pass when full 200 warriors bounded out into the open air, armed with guns, lances, bows, shields and war clubs.

And with the shrill war cry still quivering on his lips, young Lagona, the brave son of their head chief, sprang from his lodge with his pinioned lance in his hand—that lance whereon were more scalp notches now than could be counted on the weapon of the oldest brave in the tribe.

He was tall, formed like an Apollo, with noble features, and eyes wherein shone the fire of a true warrior. The war eagle feathers were twined in his scalp lock, and more than one scar upon his broad breast told that he had not passed unscathed through the storm of battle. But there were no scars on his back.

"What is the matter? Why has Lagona sounded the war whoop?" asked Nemahaha, his father, as he stood by the side of his son, whose whole frame was quivering with excitement.

"The Great Spirit has spoken to me in a dream!" said the young brave, growing more calm. "Let the warriors go back to their lodges! I will tell my father that which I dreamed, and I will take counsel of him, for there is wisdom in his heart."

The wondering warriors obeyed, for the will of Lagona was law to them. By his deeds of daring he had won their love and respect. And again all was quiet in the camp.

"What did the Great Spirit show Lagona in the land of dreams?" asked Nemanaha when the two were alone.

"A maiden of the pale faces, more beautiful than all the flowers of the earth, about to be sacrificed by the Lipans. And the Great Spirit told Lagona to mount and rescue the maiden and take her to his own bosom."

The old warrior shook his head and seemed annoyed when his son uttered these words.

"The dream is not good," said he. "The Chief of the Comanche must never defile his blood by mixing it with the mud of the pale faces. The eyes of my son were in a fog—he did not see right!"

"Nothing evil comes from the Great Spirit!" said Lagona, quietly, but firmly. "He led me to the land of dreams, and I will do His bidding! I will go to the Lipans! If I find there a pale-faced maiden doomed to die, she is mine, and I will take her to my breast!"

"Let Lagona have a care—the Lipans are our friends," said the old chief.

"Friend or foe, Lagona knows no fear, or feels no love for them!" said the young chief.

And arming himself hastily, but completely, he went to the pickets and unfastened two powerful and spirited horses—one white as snow, the other black as night. Mounting one and leading the other he rode forth from the gorge at full speed—halting only for a moment to tell the guard that he wished no followers, and desired that the camp should not be broken up until his return.

The dew lay bright upon the grass blades and the flowers through which he sped; and the startled grouse, and deer, and antelope fled right and left as he rode on—but he heeded them not. His course was laid for the Rio San Saba, where he knew that a large body of Lipans, fresh from a foray into Texas, were encamped.

CHAPTER II.

Bound for the sacrifice—robed for the bridal of death—yet so beautiful!

A maiden of not more than eighteen years—with a face faultless in feature, an eye blue as the cloudless heavens—long, glossy hair of golden hue in which, as if in mockery of her woe, gay feathers had been twisted—was bound to a blood-red stake in the center of the Lipan camp; robes of snowy white, such as she would have worn at a bridal in the sunny home from which she had been torn, were upon her peerless form, and rich jewels were on her neck; her cheek was white as the drifted snow, for hope had departed from her soul. There was no sign of mercy in the painted faces of the savage warriors who yelled and danced around her—no hope from the yet more merciless of her own sex, who jeered and derided her because she trembled in her helpless agony.

The fagots were heaped about her feet—the torment was now about to commence. With a blazing torch in his hand, Pekito, a young chief of the Lipans, approached from the circle of yelling demons that surrounded her; and as they became silent he said:

"The warriors are tired of dancing and singing—it is the turn of the pale-faced squaw now! Pekito would hear her sing; her screams would be music to his ears, for he lost a brother by father's hands!"

And he bent down to touch the torch to the fagots.

But ere this was done, swift, like the swooping eagle when it descends upon its prey, a horseman bounded through the dusky ring of warriors, riding a fiery steed as white as the foam which flew from its bitted mouth, and leading another, blacker than the clouds of night. The steeds he reined up besides the [illegible] fire, then he bounded to the [illegible] one blow of his broad [illegible] the persecuted maiden free from the bonds which had been cruelly drawn around her slender form.

Without uttering a word to the astonished Pekito, who for an instant seemed spell-bound by the boldness of the act—without glancing at the host of warriors, or even speaking to the maiden—he lifted her upon the back of the black courser, himself mounting the other, and with a yell of triumph, bounded away from the terrible spot.

Only for a moment were the surprised Lipans silent and quiet. Then their fearful cries of disappointed rage burst forth—then their bows were quickly strung, and the yell of pursuit heard. But their horses were not at hand; and in a moment Lagona and the rescued girl were beyond their reach—speeding far away, like birds upon the wing, over the almost boundless prairie.

"The Comanche dog shall pay for her with his own scalp!" shouted old Lazaro, the head chief of the Lipans, and father of Pekito. "Dig up the hatchet, ye braves of the Lipans—sharpen your knives, for the Comanches shall drink blood!"

And his words were received with approving shouts; for his warriors were maddened at the audacity of him who had robbed them of their captive and the pleasure of witnessing her death agonies.

And they hastened to prepare for the warpath and to pursue Lagona and his prize.

CHAPTER III.

Not many miles from the camp of the Lipans, at the very hour when Lagona so gallantly bore their intended victim away, an armed force of the most gallant and desperate men in the known world—the far-famed Texan Rangers—was riding slowly over the prairie; slowly, for their horses seemed jaded with long and hard travel; and most of them—excepting only a few led favorites, belonging to the officers and kept for an hour of need—could scarcely be spurred out of a walk.

At the head of the party, beside him who seemed to be the leader, rode an old man whose face expressed great sorrow and a look of despairing agony. By his dress he did not seem to belong to the rangers—for they were rudely uniformed, and splendidly armed with rifles and revolvers, as well as heavy bowie knives. But he was in the dress usually worn by opulent southern planters, and carried a handsomely mounted double-barreled fowling piece—a weapon which would be utterly useless in savage combat, except at very close quarters.

"I fear that we must encamp a yonder grove!" said the leader to the person last described. "There is water and timber there, and our horses are fairly run down."

And he pointed to a belt of timber in the distance which rose on the banks of one of the branches of the San Saba.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake! don't talk of stopping until we find my poor Stella, Major Ben!" said the planter to the chief of the rangers.

"My dear Mr. Delorme. I would not if it were possible for me to keep on!" said the officer, with feeling. "But our horses are so used up by this rapid and continued march that if we were to overhaul the Indians, they could with ease escape us. By the signs which have freshened every hour to-day, we are near them, and ought to be in trim for a bang-up fight; for the Lipans are tough; I've tried them!"

"Ah, Major, if you had an only child, the jewel of your heart, in their power, you would not chide me for impatience."

"I do not chide, I only counsel means to insure our success. By another day we can surely overtake them, and if our animals are all right we can whip a thousand of them."

"What? With only seventy men?"

"The rangers never count their foes until they stop to take their scalps," said the major quietly.

"Major McCullough, there is something copperish over there to the south-east!" said an old ranger, who had been scouting a few hundred yards in advance, and had drawn up his horse to await his leader.

And he pointed to a speck in the distance, which seemed to be moving rapidly over the prairie, but whether it was buffalo or a human being could not be easily distinguished even by the experienced eye of a ranger, unaided by artificial means.

The Major quickly unslung a small field telescope which he carried at his side, and adjusting the focus raised it to his eye. His eyes flashed and a gleam of pleasure flitted over his weather-beaten face as he fixed his glance upon the distant object.

"Bring up the led horses," he cried. "Let every man who has not a spare horse dismount and let his beast breathe!"

"What do you mean, Major? For Heaven's sake speak! Is it a sign of my child?" asked Mr. Delorme.

"Wait, Sir—wait until I can speak with certainty!" said the ranger; and now he looked beyond the first object to a cloud, evidently of dust, behind them.

The planter fairly trembled with anxiety. At last he again asked the Major what he saw.

"Two persons riding at full speed and followed far behind by a crowd, judging from the dust they kick up," answered the latter.

"Are they pursued Indians?"

"One is—the other is dressed in white and looks like a woman; but they both ride as swift as lightning."

"My heart tells me that it is my Stella!" cried Mr. Delorme: and he madly spurred his jaded horse and tried to urge him onward.

But the horse, too tired to make even an effort, stood with drooping head and bore the galling spur without flinching.

"Take a fresh horse, Mr. Delorme; we will soon see into the matter," said the Major kindly.

The led horses—seven or eight in number—were now brought up, and the Major, mounting one, assigned another to the planter and the rest to the most experienced and daring of his followers.

Then, after giving directions to those who were to remain behind to prepare for battle, he led the way toward the persons whom he had seen, at full speed. But, fast as he rode, the planter kept close by his side, and the rest of his men kept well up.

As they neared the objects ahead they could plainly see that the two nearest them were pursued by a large body beyond. The former, when the Major's party was first discovered, halted for a moment, as if they feared new foes in their path; but their stop was only momentary; they were soon in motion again, and did not alter their course, which led directly toward the rangers.

And the speed of those who went and those who came, soon brought the parties together.

"Thank heaven, it is my child!" shouted the planter at last, as he recognized her who rode the coal-black steed, and who also, knowing him, now waved her hand in recognition.

"I wonder what the deuce that wild Comanche is doing with her? He is a deadly foe to us—or his tribe is. This is some new freak," muttered Major Ben, as he checked the speed of his horse.

A moment more and Lagona, who had till now held the rein of the fiery horse upon which the rescued captive rode, checked it and his own in the circle made by the halting rangers.

"Stella—my darling child!" cried the planter, as he threw himself from his horse and clasped his daughter to his heaving breast.

"Safe, my father, safe!" she sobbed, as she returned to his embrace.

"What tribe are those that follow?" asked the Major of Lagona, who sat still as a statue upon his panting horse.

"Lipans! They want the scalp of the white flower, whom I took from them when they were ready to burn her?" said Lagona, quietly.

"By heavens you're a trump, if you are a Comanche!" said the Major, warmly, extending his hand, which the young chief did not take.

"Too proud to shake hands with an old ranger, I suppose," said he, noticing this.

"The hands of the rangers are red with the blood of my people!" said the Indian, haughtily.

"There's not much odds between us there—I expect your hands are as red as ours; but we can appreciate a noble action in a foe as well as a friend. You have saved the girl, and we thank you for it!" said McCullough.

"I did not save her for you—I took her for myself!" said Lagona haughtily.

"That's cool, but we've no time to argue maters. There are too many yelling Lipans in that crowd for us to face. Mount, Mr. Delorme—we must retreat to our main body, and then we'll have strength to make these yelling devils turn their backs!"

The directions of the major were obeyed, and not a moment too soon, for the Lipans were close at hand.

The party, riding back at full speed, were soon again with the rangers who, now formed in line of battle, awaited joyously the approach of the red-skinned foemen.

But the Lipans, when they arrived within a few hundred yards of the Texans, drew up—for they had a wholesome terror of the men whose fire, once opened, was fatal and unceasing.

"I'd give a thousand doubloons for fresh horses now!" muttered McCullough, as he saw the enemy halt. "One fair charge would tumble half of them to the grass, and send the rest off howling."

The Lipans, seeing that the Texans made no advance, began to gather courage; and as their force was large they began to "cavort" in circles and yell defiance.

"They must have a lesson, boys!" said the major; "but we must only make a small show, or they'll all run and give us no chance for fun at all."

He now directed some fifteen or twenty men who had the finest and freshest horses to prepare to follow him; and when they had looked to their arms, tightened their girths and set themselves firm in their saddles, he gave the wild yell of the rangers, and driving home his spurs in the flanks of his fiery horse, dashed at headlong speed away toward the yelling savages.

His men were close in his rear, at least those whom he had picked, and their yells rang out as loud as his own.

For one instant Lagona glanced at them, and then giving the rein to his wild stead and shouting his war cry he shook his lance aloft and sped madly on to join the fray.

And a cry of terror rose from the lips of Mr. Delorme at this moment, for the coal black steed upon which Stella was mounted, hearing the cry of its Comanche master, flew off wildly to join him and its mate, and poor Stella was powerless to restrain it.

"For Heaven's sake, men, charge all, or my child is lost!" cried the planter, as he saw the terrified girl borne away like a leaf upon the whirlwind.

"It's worth more than our lives to move without an order from the Major," said the officer next in charge.

"Then I go alone!" cried the agonized father, and alone he sped away after his child.

The Lipans, when they saw how few of the rangers were about to charge them, drew up in something like order to receive them, and while they drew their arrows to a head and loosened their lances for action they gave back yell for yell to the advancing foe.

Soon the rangers were at hand and on—the reins loose upon the horse's necks, the terrible revolver in each hand—they came! In a moment they were within range and a sheet of fire opened from their deadly tubes, and then the hurtling shaft, the pointed lance and the gleaming steel began to do their work.

McCullough's voice was loudest of all, and his form foremost of all for an instant only; then a wild steed dashed on even before him and the terrible cry of Lagona rang fearfully upon the ears of the Lipans.

Down—down they went, before the lead and steel of the rangers; down—down they went under the terrible war club of Lagona, and wheresoe'r he rode they fell back. For, close behind him, wheeling as he wheeled and charging as he charged, rode Stella Delorme, borne powerless upon the mighty steed whereon he had saved her from the death by torture. Like a spirit, rather than a mortal, thus she rode, unharmed, amid the storm of weapons—pale, excited, wondering how she could be spared.

The Lipans, terrified at their fearful loss, began to retreat; and McCullough, who had lost nearly a third of his brave followers, felt not like following them. But madness seemed to have seized upon Lagona; he rushed all wildly into the thickest of the retreating foe, seeming only to thirst for blood and to scorn the thousand deaths which menaced him.

But a shrill shriek from the lips of Stella aroused him an instant from his bloody frenzy. Pekito had seized her bridle rein and was urging her horse away amid his retreating braves. In a second Lagona was by her side; one moment more, and Pekito was a corpse—brained by the war club of the Comanche—and the rein of Stella's horse was free and its head turned back in time for her father to see who had a second time saved his child.

The Lipans were now in full flight—all save some fifty, who were stretched upon the ground, and who would never tread the war path more.

And Lagona—all covered with the blood of those with whom he had battled, and stained also with his own, from more than one wound—now sat as quiet upon his panting horse as if he had only been at play.

CHAPTER IV.

It was nearly night. The rangers had made their camp upon the branch of the San Saba before spoken of, in the commencement of the last chapter. And it was well they had so good a camping place, for they sorely needed rest.

Some of them were bathing their tired limbs in the clear waters of the little stream; others were cooking food at their cheerful camp fires; still others were guarding the horses which were cropping the luxuriant and tender grass by the water side.

But a central group, standing beneath the wide spreading limbs of a huge tree, demands our immediate attention.

It consisted of Major McCullough; the planter, Mr. Delorme; his daughter Stella, and Lagona, the young Comanche chief.

Near the latter, needing no restraint—for they would not leave their master—stood his two horses.

And never did a man look more noble than he, as he stood there with his arms folded across his chest—his tall form as erect as the lance which leaned against his shoulder—his look more proud and fearless than ever an emperor dare to wear.

"Noble chief! twice you have saved my daughter's life at the risk of your own!" said Delorme, who had been told by Stella of her rescue from the stake. "I do not know how to reward you sufficiently. Here is gold—all that I have with me. If you will come to Bolsa de Flores, my plantation on the Guadeloupe, I will give you more."

"The Comanche despises gold!" said Lagona, contemptuously, pushing back the heavy purse which the planter offered to him.

"Accept, at least, my watch and gun; the one will tell you the time—the other will defend you from the foe."

"The sun is my timekeeper; I have weapons of my own!" said Lagona, in the same proud tone.

"What can I give you—how reward your bravery?" asked the grateful father.

The eyes of Lagona rested for a moment upon Stella. She looked very, very beautiful and her blue eyes were fixed upon him with a look of intense gratitude. What wonder that he, all untutored in the "art of love"—for art it seems to be alas! too much—what wonder, I say, that he should mistake that grateful look for an expression of love. He did, and, pointing to her, looked Delorme full in the face and said;

"I plucked the white flower from the fire for myself! Give her to me!"

The planter looked aghast. Had the Indian asked for half—aye, all—all of his estate, he would not have been more astonished.

"What!" he gasped—"give my Stella, my angel child, to a savage—to a wild Indian?"

"Are you better than the Great Spirit?" said Lagona, haughtily. "In a dream He gave her to me, bade me go and save her, and take her to my breast. I have done so, and she must be mine!"

"Dreams always go by contraries, my young buck!" said the Major, quietly. "You had better take the gentleman's presents, and go back to your tribe again."

"You are a fool! You have a squaw's tongue—keep it between your teeth?" replied Lagona, bitterly.

The blood rushed up into the face of McCullough, and his hand sought the hilt of his knife in an instant. Stella saw that the storm of his fiery passion was about to break forth, and besought him not to be angry with the man who had saved her life.

"I will do your will, lady," said the ranger, "but more than one redskin has eaten dirt for saying less to Ben McCullough than he did!"

"The white flower need not speak for Lagona. He is a brave and does not fear the pale face chief. But he loves the white flower, and would make her his wife. Lagona is a great chief! A thousand braves come when he calls! Let the white flower speak!" said the Comanche.

"She must go home with her father!" said Stella, shrinking from the bold and demanding look of Lagona. "Let the chief accept our presents, and return to his tribe, where many a maid will be proud to accept his love!"

"Lagona will not go! The Great Spirit has spoken, and the white flower shall be his!" cried the Indian, vehemently.

"Look ye here, Mr. Lagona—if that's your name—you'd better sing in a lower key in this camp!" said the Major, exhibiting unequivocal signs of anger. "You have done this gentleman a favor, and he has offered to pay you for it, like a man. You refuse his presents, and ask what is not only unnatural, but impossible! And now you begin to put on airs, and make threats! You've got to draw rein, and stop just where you are, or we'll have to teach you a lesson of patience!"

The young Comanche turned, and if looks could have smitten a man down, would have blasted McCullough where he stood. But the latter had faced angry Indians before; and he smiled bitterly, as he said:

"You can't scare me by making faces. If you don't know how to behave yourself better, leave!"

And he pointed to the horse of the young chief.

"Lagona will go, but he will come again, and he will not come alone? He has spoken. The white flower shall be his," cried the Comanche as he called to his horse, which bounded to his side.

"He has spoken a lie! The white flower will never grow on red dirt," said the Major scornfully.

The young Indian made no reply, but vaulting upon the back of the white horse, rode off at full speed, followed by the other.

"Thank Heaven he is gone—his looks terrified me," said Stella, as she leaned upon her father's arm for support.

"I wish that he had accepted my presents," said Mr. Delorme.

"It were better, while you are wishing, to desire that you will see no more of him, at least until we are once more back within the line of settlements," said the Major.

"Why, do you think he will dare to pursue us?"

"I don't think much about it—I know he will. He dare do anything. I read devil in his eye."

"Then we ought not to tarry here."

"We will not, long. After the men and beasts have been fed and rested I shall take the back track, and we may deem ourselves lucky if we don't have him and the thousand braves he boasted of yelling at our heels before we reach the borders."

[To be Continued in The Gazette Sunday Adril 3]

Among the people of to-day there are few indeed who have not heard of the merits of Prickly Ash Bark and Berries as a household remedy. Teas and drinks have been made of them for centuries, and in hundreds of families have formed the sole reliance in rheumatic and kidney diseases. Prickly Ash Bitters now takes the place of the old system and is more beneficial in all troubles of this nature.

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